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The chance meeting of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a statistical table—some thoughts on surrealism and sociology

(2015)

1 Prelude

The UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) guidelines for writing research grants, which are typical of the genre, begin by advising applicants to "*Make sure you think your plan through and cover all stages"*—

Ask yourself the following questions.

- Have I clearly *formulated the problem ... put it in context* of contemporary scientific and theoretical debates, demonstrated the way in which my work will build on existing research and make a contribution to the area? Is there a *clear and convincingly argued analytical framework*? [...]
- Have I provided a *well thought out research design* in which there is a reasoned explanation of the scale, timing and resources necessary? [...]
- Have I given a *full and detailed description of the proposed research methods*? [...]
- Have I demonstrated a *clear and systematic approach to the analysis of data* [...][1]

What is curious—I am tempted to say, surreal—about this checklist is how much is supposed to be established *before* any empirical research has been undertaken.

That any of these might be changed *by the process of research itself* in ways that *could not have been foreseen at the start* seems never to have been considered. In Robert Merton's words—and please note that I am quoting a founding father of structural-functionalist sociology

[1] Economic and Social Research Council, "Writing a good proposal," on ESRC website, http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/applicants/application2.aspx (accessed 15 February 2015).

here, not some wild-eyed poststructuralist Parisian—"Fruitful empirical research not only tests theoretically-derived hypotheses; it also originates new hypotheses. *This might be called the 'serendipity' component in research, i.e., the discovery, by chance or sagacity, of valid results which were not sought for.*"[2] I would only add that the process of research may equally originate new data sources, methods, and forms of dissemination too.

2 An accidental sagacity

It is rare that we are able to give a precise date and origin to words, but it was Horace Walpole, youngest son of Great Britain's first Prime Minister Robert Walpole, who first coined the term "*serendipity*" in a letter of 28 January 1754. The provenance of the concept turns out to be every bit as whimsical as the caprice of circumstance to which it gives a name. "You will understand it better," Walpole tells his friend Horace Mann, "by the derivation than by the definition":

> I once read a silly fairy tale, called *the three princes of Serendip*: as their Highnesses travelled, they were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things which they were not in quest of: for instance, one of them discovered that a mule blind of the right eye had travelled the same road lately, because the grass was eaten only on the left side, where it was worse than on the right—now do you understand *Serendipity*?

Walpole emphasizes that serendipity is an "*accidental sagacity*," for "*no* discovery of a thing you *are* looking for comes under this description."[3] As Edward Solly clarified in *Notes and Queries* over a century later, "'Serendipity,' as the word was used by Walpole, meant *the discovery of things which the finder was not in search of*."[4]

There are two sides to serendipity thus understood. On the side of the subject, there is

[2] "Sociological Theory," *American Journal of Sociology* 50 (1945), quoted in Robert K. Merton and Elinor Barber, *The Travels and Adventures of Serendipity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004, 141.
[3] Horace Walpole, letter to Horace Mann, 28 January 1754. Quoted in Barber and Merton, *Serendipity*, p. 2.
[4] Edward Solly, letter of 3 August 1878, in *Notes & Queries*, series 5, vol. 10 (1878), p. 98. Quoted in Merton and Barber, *Serendipity*, p. 52.

Walpole's "sagacity." Those hoping for serendipity need to have a "receptive eye."[5] It is the unexpected, the incongruous, the anomalous—in this case, the fact that the grass by the roadside was cropped only on the inferior, left side—that draws them. To adapt a distinction Roland Barthes makes apropos photography, this is the *punctum* that pricks the *studium*, upsetting expectations.[6] Serendipity requires "Curiosity, wonder, openness—these cohabit, comfortably, in that marvelous coinage of Walpole."[7]

But not every photograph has a *punctum*, and anomalies cannot be conjured up to order. So the other, irreducibly *objective* side of serendipity is what Walpole calls "accident" and André Breton dubbed *objective chance* (*hasard objectif*), a key concept in the surrealist lexicon. *Hasard objectif*, Breton told an audience at the Mánes Gallery in Prague in 1935, is "that sort of chance that shows man, in a way that is still very mysterious, a necessity that escapes him, even though he experiences it as a vital necessity."[8] Think of Archimedes and the bath, Newton and the apple, Alexander Fleming and a Petri dish contaminated with mold.

I am drawing here on Robert K. Merton and Elinor Barber's book *The Travels and Adventures of Serendipity*. This *dérive* through the history of serendipity admirably exemplifies its authors' sense of the absolute contingency of all things, transporting us from Christoforo Armeno's *Peregrinaggio di tre giovani figlivoli del Re di Serendippo*—the source for Walpole's "silly fairy tale"—in Venice in 1557, through cruise lines and London bookstores, advertisements for American pharmaceutical companies and the corridors of the Harvard Medical School, to an Australian ranch and a nudist camp outside Atlanta. Completed in 1958, the manuscript was "set aside ... for a while" while Merton turned his attention elsewhere. By the time "this recalcitrant book" (as he calls it) was published—in Italian—in 2002, Elinor Barber was dead and Merton had celebrated his ninety-first birthday.[9] He died the next year. Princeton University Press finally published an English edition of *The Travels and Adventures of Serendipity* in 2004.

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[5] Merton and Barber, *Serendipity*, p. 141. Merton is describing his own serendipitous (re)discovery of the word serendipity.

[6] See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard, London: Vintage, 2000, pp. 25-7.

[7] Roald Hoffmann, Nobel Laureate in Chemistry, endorsing Merton and Barber's *Serendipity*. Quoted on Princeton University Press website, http://press.princeton.edu/quotes/q7576.html [accessed 15 February 2015].

[8] André Breton, "Surrealist Situation of the Object: Situation of the Surrealist Object," in his *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1972, p. 268.

[9] Merton and Barber, *Serendipity*, pp. ix-x.

3 The Bureau of Surrealist Research

What then might the sociology of "curiosity, wonder, openness"—a sociology that is open to the whimsies of serendipity and the hazards of objective chance—actually look like?

The Bureau for Surrealist Research, which opened at 15, rue de Grenelle in Paris on 11 October 1924—four days before André Breton published the *Manifesto of Surrealism*—offers one possible methodological antecedent. The Bureau's objective was to gather "all the information possible relating to forms that might express the unconscious activity of the mind."[10] I should perhaps make clear at this point that my concern in this lecture is not with surrealist doctrines per se. I agree with Susan Sontag that "The error of the surrealist militants was to imagine the surreal as something universal, that is, a matter of psychology, whereas it turns out to be what is most local, ethnic, class-bound, dated."[11] Like Ben Highmore, I propose instead to regard surrealism as "a form of social research into everyday life ... to see its products not as works of art but as documents of this social research. In this way artistic techniques such as collage become methodologies for attending to the social."[12]

The press announcement of the opening of the Bureau reads like an *Onion* satire of a call for papers. "*No domain has been specified, a priori, for this undertaking*," it explains, "and surrealism proposes a gathering of the greatest possible number of experimental elements *for a purpose that cannot yet be perceived*":

> All those who have the means to contribute, in any fashion, to the creation of genuine surrealist archives, are *urgently requested* to come forward: let them shed light on the genesis of an invention, or propose a new system of psychic investigation, or make us the judges of striking coincidences, or reveal their most instinctive ideas on fashion, as well as politics, etc., or freely criticize morality, or even simply entrust us with their most

[10] *Le Journal littéraire*, 11 October 1924, quoted in Gérard Durozoi, *History of the Surrealist Movement*, trans. Alison Anderson, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002, p. 63.
[11] Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York: Rosetta Books, 2005, p. 41.
[12] Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction*, London: Routledge, 2002, p. 46.

curious dreams ...[13]

Two people staffed the ground-floor office of the "Centrale" on a daily rota and kept a *Cahier de la permanence* recording interactions with visitors.[14] On October 13 André Breton duly noted the arrival of vitrines by Man Ray and asked that somebody check out "a poster noticed by Jean Paulhan titled IT IS NECESSARY TO TAKE THE SIDE OF THE DEVIL, which can be found on the boulevard Raspail."[15] Upstairs was a room where members of the group could meet, discuss, or work on their individual projects. "An atmosphere of effervescent research reigned," writes Gérard Durozoi, "where the gifts of chance were always welcome ... along with the marvelous, *thought to be ever latent in everyday life and ready to suggest incongruous juxtapositions of objects and arouse the imagination by reinforcing the victory over mental habits*."[16]

Indiscriminately mixing media and disciplines, over the next few years the surrealists would pioneer a variety of ways to uncover "the actual functioning of thought ... in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern,"[17] They hung out in flea markets hoping to stumble across *objets trouvés*, objects that (in Breton's words) "go off to dream at the antique fair ... nourishing the meditation that this place arouses ... concerning the precarious fate of so many little human constructions."[18] They went on directionless strolls through nondescript areas of Paris, anticipating the Situationists' *dérive* (drift)—a technique for mapping urban psychogeographies that was designed to disrupt the well-trodden paths of *habitus*. They assassinated the author through automatic writing, trances, recordings of dreams, and games of chance. They dethroned the artist with collage, frottage, and decalcomania—all techniques that any amateur could use—and made surrealist objects "provoked by the realization of unconscious acts."[19]

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[13] *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, 1924, quoted in Durozoi, *History*, p. 63. My emphasis.
[14] The "Centrale" was eventually closed to the public on 30 January 1925, though Breton was insistent that "the world must know it exists" (*La Révolution surréaliste*, 2, 1925, p. 31).
[15] Quoted in Agnès Angliviel de la Beaumelle, Isabelle Monod-Fontaine and Claude Schweisguth (eds), *André Breton: La beauté convulsive*, Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1991, p. 127.
[16] Durozoi, *History*, p. 65. Emphasis added.
[17] André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism," in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, p. 26.
[18] André Breton, *Mad Love*, trans. Mary Ann Caws, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987, p. 28.
[19] Breton, "Surrealist Situation of the Object," p. 276.

When T. S. Eliot visited the London International Surrealist Exhibition of 1936, according to the English surrealist painter Eileen Agar he lingered long and lovingly "in front of Meret Oppenheim's teacup and saucer covered in fur, obviously moved by this super-objective correlate of the female sex."[20] Metamorphosing from author into object, Oppenheim stands naked in front of a printing press in Man Ray's 1933 photographic series *Veiled Erotic*. The handle of the press is positioned as if to give her an erect penis. David Lomas comments that this "arms the female body with a detachable phallus, a pointer to the ways in which the privileged signifier of sexual difference is 'up for grabs'"—an "erasure of distinctions between the sexes" that is reinforced by the wheel partially covering Oppenheim's breasts and her close-cropped hairstyle.[21] Surrealist photographers—Dora Maar, Lee Miller and Claude Cahun as much as Raoul Ubac, Hans Bellmer, Bill Brandt, or Man Ray—loved to play with the human body, visually deconstructing the gendered significances socially ascribed to it.

In his Prague lecture, André Breton summarized the principle underlying this battery of experimental methods. He quoted Max Ernst, whose collages, he says, have played "a decisive role ... in the creation of the particular view of things that we are here considering":

> I am tempted to consider this procedure [collage] to be the exploitation of *the fortuitous meeting of two distant realities on an inappropriate plane* (this is said as a paraphrase and a generalization of Lautreamont's famous phrase: "As beautiful as the fortuitous meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table", or, to use a shorter term, *the cultivation of the effects of a systematic bewildering*) ...[22]

4 Exploding fixed (the photographic uncanny)

[20] Eileen Agar, *A Look at My Life*, London: Methuen, 1988, p. 117.

[21] David Lomas, untitled commentary on "Veiled Erotic," in Jennifer Mundy (ed.), *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, London: Tate, 2001, p. 224.

[22] Max Ernst, "Beyond Painting" (1934), as quoted in Breton, "Surrealist Situation of the Object," pp. 274-5. Emphasis added. Two versions of Ernst's text (in different translations) are available in Max Ernst and others, *Beyond Painting*, Chicago: Solar Books, 2009. Breton himself had come out with a remarkably similar formulation when introducing Ernst's first Paris exhibition at the Au sans pareil bookstore in May-June 1921: "But the marvelous ability to reach out, without leaving the field of our experience, to two distinct realities and bring them together to create a spark ... this is what holds Dada's attention, for the time being." "Max Ernst," in André Breton, *The Lost Steps*, ed. and trans. Mark Polizzotti, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996, pp. 60-61.

Of all surrealism's research methods, the camera proved perhaps the most effective instrument for revealing the uncanny in the ordinary and the marvelous in the mundane. While Sontag dismisses much surrealist experiment—photograms, multiple exposures, solarization, and so on—as contrived and passé, she maintains that photography is nevertheless "the one art that has managed to carry out ... a Surrealist takeover of the modern sensibility." Reminding us that "surrealism has always courted accidents, welcomed the uninvited, flattered disorderly presences," she stresses that photographs "don't seem deeply beholden to the intentions of the artist, but owe their existence to a loose cooperation (quasi-magical, quasi-accidental) between photographer and subject—mediated by an ever simpler and more automated machine."[23] In a perfect synthesis of what André Breton called the magic-circumstantial and the exploding-fixed,[24] the photographic image *fixes*[25] Henri Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment"[26] for all eternity. Surrealism "lies at the very heart of the photographic enterprise: in the creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree..."[27]

For Sontag, the earliest surrealist photographs date from the 1850s, "when photographers first went out prowling the streets of London, Paris and New York, looking for their unposed slice of life." A true genealogy of photographic surrealism would extend through Paul Martin's London and Arnold Genthe's San Francisco Chinatown in the 1890s through Atget's "twilight Paris of shabby streets and decaying trades" (which the surrealists loved) and "the dramas of sex and loneliness depicted in Brassaï's *Paris de nuit*" to "the image of the city as a theater of disaster in Weegee's *Naked City*."[28] We might want to add to that list Robert Frank's "deliberately random"[29] *The Americans*, Bill Owens's *Suburbia, William Eggleston's Guide,*

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[23] Sontag, *On Photography*, pp. 39-41.

[24] "Convulsive beauty will be *erotic-veiled, exploding-fixed, magical-circumstantial* or it will not be" (Breton, *Mad Love*). It is perhaps instructive that the French edition of Rosalind Krauss and Jennifer Livingstone's classic *L'Amour fou: Photography and Surrealism* (Washington: Corcoran Gallery/New York: Abbeville Press, 1985) is titled *Explosante-Fixe: photographie et surréalisme* (Paris: Hazan, 2002).

[25] Aside from the temporal connotations, we might think here of the chemical "fixers" used in the final phase of the photographic developing process to render the film or paper insensitive to any further action of light.

[26] "To me, photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression." *The Decisive Moment: Photography by Henri-Cartier Bresson*, Berlin: Steidl, 2014, unpaginated foreword by Cartier-Bresson.

[27] Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 40.

[28] Sontag, *On Photography*, pp. 39-41.

[29] Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 48.

Daido Moriyama's *Shinjuku*, Martin Parr's *The Last Resort* and Alex Soth's *Songbook*.

Roland Barthes begins *Camera Lucida* (his last book, written after a lifetime thinking about signification) with "an amazement I have not been able to lessen since" at the realization, on looking at an 1852 photograph of Napoleon's younger brother Jerome, that "I am looking at *eyes that once looked at the Emperor*." The source of his amazement—and the reason for the uncanny power of the specifically photographic image—is ***this***:

> In the Photograph, the event is never transcended for the sake of something else: the Photograph ... is the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency, matte and somehow stupid, the This ... in short, what Lacan calls the *Tuché*, the Occasion, the Encounter, the Real, in its indefatigable expression.[30]

The visual anthropologist Craig Campbell builds on Barthes' insight to suggest that photographs most useful role in social science is to act as "*agents provocateurs* within institutional archives." "Photographs," he writes, "consistently threaten meaningful narratives that they are often employed to illustrate," functioning "as documents of witness and presence [that] drive a critique of mundane particularity into fields of representation which so often efface the everyday and the ordinary."

The objects that went off to dream at Campbell's antique fair were thousands of glass-plate negatives from Soviet cultural-construction among the indigenous peoples of Siberia during the 1920s and '30s, all marked by manipulation, damage, and degradation. These imperfections, he argues, expose "the public secret that the relationship between the historian and the past is as much an art as a science in its reliance on serendipity, creativity, selective vision, and accident." The negatives point beneath and beyond the narratives in which we have reconstructed events and ordered them into coherent histories, to "the dense and particular wealth of ordinary life; the irreducibly deep and strange, the impossibly complex dynamism of humans, plants, animals, projects, aspirations, weather, obligations; *life as it is lived, not as it is written*." Every one of Campbell's glass plates is a "relentless indication of specificity," a

[30] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 3-4. Emphasis added.

Barthesian *punctum* that may blow apart the *studium* through which we make history legible.[31]

Campbell is drawing here on the concept of "formlessness" [*informe*] with which Georges Bataille infamously taunted "academics" who want to fit "what exists into a frock-coat, a mathematical frock-coat ..." "To affirm on the contrary that the universe resembles nothing and is only *formless*," argued Bataille, "amounts to saying that the universe is something akin to a spider or a gob of spittle.[32] "Formlessness," Campbell writes, "is informed by the task of *bringing things 'down in the world'* [*déclasser*] ... The photograph as archive of the everyday presents not order but its opposite, evidence of disorder and disarray."[33]

5 The ethnographic surreal

Together with Michel Leiris, Robert Desnos, André Masson and others, Bataille (who described himself as "surrealism's old enemy *from within*"[34]) was one of the "dissident surrealists" attacked by Breton in the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* of 1929.[35] The dissidents formed the core of the review *Documents* (1929-30), which was edited by Bataille. Leiris later described *Documents* as "a Janus-faced publication with one side turned towards the higher spheres of culture ... and the other towards *a savage domain where travellers ventured with neither map nor passport of any kind*."[36] He does not specify where the latter domain lies, but in the pages of *Documents* Ekoi ritual dance masks kept company with Stravinsky's *Capriccio*, the Marquis de Sade's handwriting, and the Fox Movietone Follies of 1929, while Eddie South and his Alabamians and the Hayman Swayze Plantation Orchestra rubbed shoulders with "André

[31] Craig Campbell, "Writing Light on Ashes," in Kyler Zeleny (ed.), *Materialities*, London: Velvet Cell Pocketbooks 1, in press (2015). Emphasis added. I quote from the manuscript version of the essay, with the author's permission. See further Craig Campbell, *Agitating Images: Photography against History in Indigenous Siberia*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

[32] Georges Bataille, "L'Informe," *Documents*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1929, translated in Georges Bataille et al, *Encyclopedia Acephalica*, ed. Alastaire Brotchie, various translators, London: Atlas Press, 1995, pp. 51-2. "*Déclasser*" has also been translated as "to bring things down in the world," as used by Craig Campbell here.

[33] Campbell, "Writing Light on Ashes."

[34] Georges Bataille, "On the Subject of Slumbers," in his *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, ed. and trans. Michael Richardson, London: Verso, 2006: 49.

[35] André Breton, "Second Manifesto of Surrealism," in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, pp. 117-174.

[36] Michel Leiris, "From Bataille the Impossible to the Impossible *Documents*," in Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris, *Correspondence*, ed. Louis Yvert, trans. Liz Heron, Oxford: Seagull Books, 2008, p. 14. Emphasis added.

Masson: the Universal Dismemberer," the art of the Solomon Islands, and Sacheverell Sitwell on Mexican baroque.[37] James Clifford (in *The Predicament of Culture*) describes "the journal's basic method" as "juxtaposition—fortuitous or ironic collage," in which "the proper arrangement of cultural symbols and artifacts is constantly placed in doubt ... Its images, in their equalizing gloss and distancing effect, present in the same plane a Châtelet show advertisement, a Hollywood movie clip, a Picasso, a Giacometti, a documentary photo from colonial New Caledonia, a newspaper clip, an Eskimo mask, an Old Master, a musical instrument."[38] This is a systematic deployment of Ernst's collage principle in the service of a radical cultural leveling [*déclasser*].

Though there had been earlier intimations of a cultural crisis of modernity (Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Cézanne, the cubists), for Clifford it was World War I that finally cut the modern self "loose from its attachments" to "discover meaning where it may—a predicament, evoked at its most nihilistic, that underlies both surrealism and modern ethnography."[39] Max Ernst would have agreed. "For us," he explained,

> Dada ... resulted from the absurdity, the whole immense stupidity, of that imbecilic war. We young people had come back from the war in a state of stupefaction, and our rage had to find expression somehow or other. This it did quite naturally though attacks on *the foundations of the civilization* responsible for the war. *Attacks on speech, syntax, logic, literature, painting and so on*.[40]

After the war, Clifford argues, "*the world was permanently surrealist* ... Modern ethnography and surrealism began with a reality deeply in question. Others appeared now as serious human alternatives; modern cultural relativism became possible." Modern ethnography and surrealism provided complementary disorientations—and alternative standpoints from which to critique the socially given western order of things. While "the ethnographic label suggests a characteristic

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[37] These are taken from the contents of *Documents* 7, 1929, and 5, 1930 respectively, as listed in Dawn Ades and Simon Baker, *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and DOCUMENTS*, London: Hayward Gallery, 2006, pp. 258-9. The full set of *Documents* is available in facsimile (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1991).

[38] James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988, p. 132.

[39] Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*, p. 119.

[40] Quoted in Rudolf Kuenzli (ed.), *Dada*, New York: Phaidon, 2006, p. 31. Emphasis added.

attitude of participant observation among the artifacts of a defamiliarized cultural reality," the surrealist attitude "tended to work in the reverse sense, making the familiar strange."[41]

Breton and Bataille would later briefly cooperate on the legendary journal *Minotaure* (1933-9), a venture that initially embraced ethnography, archaeology, history of religion, mythology and psychoanalysis alongside the arts. Jacques Lacan contributed to the first issue and the second was entirely devoted to the first ethnographic expedition to Dakar-Djibouti—of which Leiris had been the recording secretary. But the magazine was soon taken over by Breton's group and became a more conventional art review, albeit (in the judgment of Brassaï, who had no love for Breton) "the best art review in the world."[42] Bataille and Leiris then teamed up with Roger Caillois, another ex-surrealist who had fallen foul of Breton (over the great man's refusal to cut open a Mexican jumping bean because it might destroy the "mystery" within),[43] to found the Collège de Sociologie. The project of the Collège—once again breaking down the presumed barriers between modern western selves and primitive others—was to produce a "*sacred sociology of the contemporary world*."[44]

6 The anthropology of ourselves

On the other side of the English Channel the unlikely trio of Tom Harrisson, Charles Madge, and Humphrey Jennings were meantime setting up Mass-Observation (M–O). An aspiring poet, Madge apprenticed at the *Daily Mirror*. "Fourteen months as a reporter," he later wrote, "taught me to understand the queer poetry of the newspaper and the advertisement hoarding, which ... serve as vehicles for the expression of unconscious fears and wishes of the mass."[45] Jennings cut his teeth working for the GPO Film Unit, which was based near the home Madge shared with the

[41] Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*, p. 120-1. Emphasis added.
[42] Brassaï, *Conversations with Picasso*, trans. Jane-Marie Todd, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002, pp. 7, 13.
[43] Roger Caillois to André Breton, 17 December 1934, in his *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*, ed. Claudine Frank, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003, p. 85.
[44] Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois, "Sacred Sociology of the Contemporary World," in Dennis Hollier (ed.), *The College of Sociology 1937-9*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, pp. 157-8. Emphasis added.
[45] Charles Madge, "Press, radio, and social consciousness," quoted in Ben Highmore, "Itinerant Surrealism: British Surrealism either side of the Second World War," in Dana Arnold and David Peters Corbett (eds), *A Companion to British Art: 1600 to the Present*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2013.

poet Kathleen Raine in Blackheath. Madge published "the first thoroughgoing article on the specificity of English surrealism" in *New Verse* in 1933.[46] Jennings helped organize the 1936 London International Surrealist Exhibition and was deputy editor of *London Bulletin* (1938-40), the only British surrealist journal.

Both men believed in a socially engaged surrealism. Madge (who was a member of the British Communist Party) insisted that "surrealism is not a literary school" but "a laboratory of studies, of experimentation, that rejects all inclinations of individualism."[47] His 1936 prose-poem "Bourgeois News" offers surreal visions of a Britain in which "Floods are frequent because the rivers ... have been neglected for a century":

> The mountains heaved up like a rough sea for twelve miles, and the hamlet with its 200 inhabitants disappeared. Two mailcoaches arrived safely at their destination, but with the drivers frozen dead in their seats. Trains were buried for three days. London awoke to chaos on the 19th. The snow lay a uniform solid three feet thick and fifteen feet in drifts. Many boats careered wildly along the road, crashing into houses and other buildings on the river bank. The crew of the Strathrye soaked their beds in paraffin and ignited them to attract attention. Days were passed in making shrouds, in farewells, in drinking holy thin soup. The schools were empty so that the whole family could die together, and no debts were paid.[48]

For his part Jennings found it necessary to remind Herbert Read and Hugh Sykes-Davies (who wished to claim surrealism for the English Romantic tradition) that "'coincidences' have the infinite freedom of appearing anywhere, anytime, to anyone: in broad daylight to those whom we most despise in places we have most loathed: not even to us at all: probably least to petty seekers after mystery and poetry on deserted sea-shores and in misty junk-shops."[49]

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[46] Michel Remy, *Surrealism in Britain*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999, p. 32. Among other things Madge claims John Stuart Mill for surrealism, since he "excuses even an improper use of a term, when, by means of it, some familiar association is called up which brings the meaning home to the mind, as it were by a flash" (C. H. Madge, "Surrealism for the English," *New Verse*, no. 6, December 1933, p. 17).

[47] Charles Madge, "The Meaning of Surrealism," *New Verse*, no. 10, pp. 13-15.

[48] Charles Madge, "Bourgeois News," *New Verse*, no. 19, Feb-March 1936, pp. 7-8.

[49] Humphrey Jennings, "Surrealism," *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, December 1936, reproduced in Kevin Jackson (ed.) *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, Manchester: Carcanet Press, 220.

Tom Harrisson had no such literary or artistic associations. Starting out as a self-taught ornithologist at Harrow School, at the age of 19 he enlisted amateur 1300 birdwatchers to take part in the first UK national census of the great crested grebe—an event that continues to this day. It was on an ornithological expedition to Sarawak in 1932 that Harrisson "found, for once, that he liked and was liked immediately by a group of people, the longhouse dwellers of north-central Borneo." Birdwatching turned into people watching when he joined an Oxford ethnographic exhibition to the New Hebrides in 1933 and stayed on with the cannibals of Maleluka. He defended the headhunters' way of life in his 1937 book *Savage Civilisation*, published by the left-wing house of Victor Gollancz, which became a popular bestseller. In 1936 he moved to Bolton, where he worked deep undercover as a lorry-driver, ice-cream vendor and shop assistant and covertly took notes on the people around him.[50]

The operating table upon which Jennings and Madge would meet Harrisson was the letters page of the *New Statesman*. On 12 December 1936 a letter appeared there calling for "anthropological study" of the "primitive" public reaction to Edward VIII's recent abdication. Madge responded on 2 January 1937 indicating that a group had already been formed for this purpose.[51] He warned that because British society was "ultra-repressed" fieldwork would have to be "roundabout," but that "clues" might be found "in the popular phenomenon of the coincidence."[52] As it happens, the only poem Tom Harrisson published in his life ("Coconut Moon: A Philosophy of Cannibalism, in the New Hebrides") appeared directly below Madge's letter in the *New Statesman*. Serendipity worked its magic. The umbrella and the sewing machine made love. Harrisson contacted Madge and Mass–Observation was born.

Madge, Jennings, and Harrisson formally announced M–O's foundation in another letter to the *New Statesman* on 30 January 1937 entitled "Anthropology at home." "We are [...] working out a complete plan of campaign," they wrote, "which will be possible when we have not fifty but 5,000 observers. The following are a few examples of problems that will arise":

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[50] Judith M. Heimann, "Harrisson, Tom Harnett," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/31205?docPos=1 (accessed 1 March 2015).

[51] See Remy, *Surrealism in Britain*, p. 102. He meant himself, Jennings, Kathleen Raine, the filmmaker Stuart Legg, and the communist poet David Gascoyne.

[52] Quoted in Angus Calder and Dorothy Sheridan (eds), *Speak for Yourself: A Mass-Observation Anthology 1937-1949*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 3.

> Behaviour of people at war memorials.
> Shouts and gestures of motorists.
> The aspidistra cult.
> Anthropology of football pools.
> Bathroom behaviour.
> Beards, armpits, eyebrows.
> Anti-semitism.
> Distribution, diffusion and significance of the dirty joke.
> Funerals and undertakers.
> Female taboos about eating.
> The private lives of midwives.[53]

Within a few weeks over 1000 people had applied to become mass-observers: "coalminers, factory hands, shopkeepers, salesmen, housewives, hospital nurses, bank clerks, business men, doctors and schoolmasters, scientists and technicians." Their main task was to keep an account of everything they did from waking until sleeping on the twelfth day of every month throughout the year—the so-called Day Surveys.

M–O was throwing down an epistemological gauntlet. "The original purpose of the Day Surveys," wrote Madge and Harrisson, "was to collect a mass of data *without any selective principle*"; "Mass–Observation has always assumed that its untrained Observers would be *subjective cameras, each with his or her distortion*," who "tell us not what society is like, but what it looks like to them."[54] There was an emancipatory dimension to this project, too. Mass–Observation was a means of re-enchanting the everyday, Madge and Jennings wrote elsewhere, that would be open to all:

> In taking up the role of observer, each person becomes like Courbet at his easel, Cuvier with his cadaver, and Humboldt with his continent. The process of observing raises him

[53] Quoted in Rod Mengham, "Bourgeois News: Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge," *New Formations*, no. 44 (Autumn 2001), pp. 26–33, reprinted in *Jacket*, no. 20, 2002, http://jacketmagazine.com/20/meng-jen-madg.html (accessed 1 March 2015).
[54] Charles Madge and Tom Harrisson, *The First Year's Work*, London: Lindsay Drummond, 1938, p. 66. First emphasis added.

from subjectivity to objectivity. *What has become unnoticed through familiarity is raised into consciousness again.*[55]

It is not surprising that such miscegenation of art, science, and politics got up academic noses. Writing in *Sociological Review*, Raymond Firth castigated Mass Observation's lack of "a clearly stated plan of inquiry" or "precision in the methods employed." In *May the Twelfth,* he complains, "description of Coronation activities is interlarded continuously with remarks on the weather, accounts of people's health, or babies or toilet, or argument about women cyclists or art ... This non-selective attitude means that the authors have not formulated their theoretical position at all clearly." It is remarkable how some things don't change in 75 years: this takes us back to where we began, with the ESRC.

Firth goes on to criticize M–O for burying "what to an anthropologist are *essential phases of the phenomenon*, namely the complex ritual involved, the religious and moral precepts associated with kingship, and the political structure which gives the framework for the ceremony" under "masses of irrelevant crude fact." What seems not to have occurred to him—but is amply revealed by M-O's scattergun methodology—is that quite possibly these are *not* the "essential phases of the phenomenon" but that a modern coronation is (also) just a jolly good day out. Part of the complexity of social phenomena, in other words, is their *different* significance to differently located actors, a plurality that gets lost in Firth's search for that perennial object of sociological desire, a "*representative objective record of real opinion*."[56]

It may seem an improbable leap from Lautréamont's umbrella and sewing machine to Emile Durkheim's *Rules of Sociological Method*, but this is after all a lecture on surrealism and sociology. "*The first and most basic rule is to consider social facts as things,*" said Durkheim[57]—that is to say, "to treat them as *data,*"[58] about whose true nature we cannot assume we know anything *a priori*. The corollary is that the sociologist must "*systematically discard all*

[55] Charles Madge and Humphrey Jennings, "Poetic Description and Mass-Observation," *New Verse*, no. 24, 1937, p. 3. Emphasis added.
[56] Raymond Firth, "An Anthropologists' View of Mass Observation," *Sociological Review*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1939, pp. 178-9. Emphasis added.
[57] Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, ed. Steven Lukes, trans. W. D. Halls, New York: The Free Press, 1982, p. 60.
[58] Durkheim, *Rules*, p. 69.

preconceptions"—which is exactly what M–O's unscientific methodology does.[59] Its recordings of the aspidistra cult and the secret lives of midwives are the equivalent of Craig Campbell's Siberian negatives—time-bombs ticking away in the archives, ever ready to subvert our preconceptions of social coherence, meaning, and order.

7 Imaginative histories

James Clifford follows Susan Sontag in understanding surrealism as "a pervasive—perhaps dominant—modern *sensibility*," which he characterizes as "an aesthetic that values *fragments, curious collections, unexpected juxtapositions*—that works to provoke the manifestation of extraordinary realities drawn from the domains of the erotic, the exotic, and the unconscious."[60] M–O's *May the Twelfth* and *Britain by Mass-Observation* are just such collections, assemblages of unexpectedly juxtaposed fragments that are neither mobilized to advance a narrative nor marshaled to exemplify a theoretical argument. I am not the first to notice that this montage-form has an affinity with the work of Walter Benjamin: not only his unfinished *Arcades Project*, but also such texts as *Berlin Childhood around 1900* and *One-Way Street*.[61] Ben Highmore has explored this affinity in much greater detail than I can do here, so I shall be brief.[62]

Benjamin's attempt to grasp the world in a proliferation of fragments was systematic, a *methodology*. "Method of this project: literary montage," he wrote in *The Arcades Project*. "I needn't *say* anything. Merely *show*. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own, by making use of them." "Must the Marxist understanding of history necessarily be acquired at the expense of the *perceptibility of history*?" he goes on, wondering "in what way is it possible to conjoin a heightened graphicness to the realization of the Marxist method?" His answer is that "The first stage in this undertaking will be *to carry over*

[59] Durkheim, *Rules*, p. 72.
[60] Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*, p. 118. Emphasis added.
[61] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Roy Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999; *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, ed. Amit Chaudhuri, trans. J.A. Underwood, London: Penguin, 2009; *Berlin Childhood Around 1900: Hope in the Past*, trans. Howard Eiland, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.
[62] Highmore, *Everyday Life*, pp. 60-74.

the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event."[63]

Unfortunately for those academics who want to force the universe into a frock-coat, Benjamin's resulting "large-scale construction" resembles Marx's *Capital* less than it does a disorderly Dada collage—Hannah Höch's "Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany," perhaps, in which "wheels with cogs and gears, automobiles and dancers are juxtaposed with the potentates of the Reich, the men of the empire, and those of the Weimar Republic" while "a pensive Albert Einstein observes the turbulent dynamism of the Berlin metropolis, reduced to a giant weightless mechanism" and "the celebrated Berlin dancer Niddy Impokoven ... seems to breath into the composition its dynamism with a single stag leap."[64]

Benjamin's objective was not to produce an *analysis* or *explanation* of an epoch but rather to present "an *image* of that epoch ... a historical 'mirror-world,'"[65] through which "*not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been*" transforms into "*something that just now first happened to us, first struck us*." Like Madge and Jennings, Benjamin wished to "*illuminate the darkness of the lived moment*" with "*the flash of awakened consciousness*," breaking "the cycle of the eternally selfsame, until the collective seizes upon [these images] in politics and history emerges."[66] In his famous formulation,

> It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, *image* is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, *image is dialectics at a standstill*.[67]

This "*moment of awakening* is identical with the 'now of recognizability' in which things put on their true—surrealist—face."[68]

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[63] Benjamin, *Arcades*, pp. 460-1. Emphasis added.
[64] Sophie Bernard, "Hannah Höch: Schnitt mit dem Küchenmesser Dada," in Laurent Le Bon (ed.), *Dada*, Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2005, p. 494.
[65] Benjamin, *Arcades*, p. 10. Emphasis added.
[66] Benjamin, *Arcades*, pp. 388-90. Emphasis added.
[67] Benjamin, *Arcades*, p. 462. Emphasis added.
[68] Benjamin, *Arcades*, p. 464. Emphasis added.

In 1938 Humphrey Jennings co-organized the exhibition *The Impact of the Machines* at the London Gallery and edited a series of "texts on the Impact of the Machine" for *London Bulletin*, which he presented in the form of a collage. These texts also served as the basis of a series of talks on the Industrial Revolution that he gave at a Miner's Institute in Cwmgiedd in Wales by way of a thank you for the community's cooperation in the making of his film *The Silent Village*. Though Jennings drifted away from Mass–Observation after *May the Twelfth*, he continued to collect material on the topic for the rest of his life (he died in 1950, falling off a cliff in Greece while scouting a film on postwar healthcare in Europe). Comprising extracts from letters, diaries, poems and novels, newspapers, scientific journals and reports, this corpus came to rival Benjamin's *Arcades*. Jennings's daughter Marie-Louise and Charles Madge published a posthumous and much abridged edition of the unfinished work in 1985 as *Pandaemonium 1660-1886: The Coming of the Machine as Seen by Contemporary Observers*.[69] Jennings was retrospectively applying M-O's techniques to the past, unleashing a babble of voices to play ducks and drakes with the historians' narratives.

Introducing the book, Marie-Louise Jennings is at pains to stress: "some reviewers believed *Pandaemonium* was an anthology. It is not ... its composition can be compared to a film: each piece moves on to the next, telling a story which never stops. My father used the word 'image' constantly, whether about film, painting or writing."[70] "In this book I present the *imaginative history* of the Industrial Revolution," Jennings himself explains. "I say *'present', not describe or analyse,* because the Imagination is a function of man whose traces are more delicate to handle than the facts and events and ideas of which history is usually constructed ... I present it by means of what I call *Images*":

> These are quotations from writings of the period in question ... which either in the writing or in the nature of the matter itself or both have revolutionary and symbolic and illuminatory quality. I mean that they contain in little a whole world—they are the knots

[69] Humphrey Jennings, *Pandaemonium 1660-1886: The Coming of the Machine as Seen by Contemporary Observers*, ed. Marie-Louise Jennings and Charles Madge, London: Icon Books, 2012. At 376 pages, writes Marie-Louise Jennings, "the present book is around one third of the original text" (p. xxviii).
[70] Marie-Louise Jennings, in *Pandaemonium*, p. xxvii.

> in a great net of tangled time and space—the moments at which the situation of humanity is clear—even if only for the flash time of the photographer or the lighting.[71]

Is this uncanny echo of Benjamin just another petrifying surrealist coincidence? Jennings could not have read *The Arcades Project*, which Benjamin left with his good friend George Bataille (who hid the manuscript in the Bibliothèque nationale) when he fled France in 1940, since it remained unpublished until 1982. Or could it be that both *The Arcades Project* and *Pandaemonium* are expressions of something in the *Zeitgeist*, an intimation, flashing up in a moment of danger, that the "true face of things" *is* surrealist?

8 Strawberry Hill forever

Let me give the last dance to Horace Walpole. According to the website for Strawberry Hill, the neo-Gothic house he built in Twickenham on the western outskirts of London, "Walpole delighted in his eclectic array of objects ... from a pair of gloves belonging to James I to the spurs worn by King William in the Battle of the Boyne, and a lock of hair of Edward IV, which Walpole tells us was 'cut from his corpse in St George's Chapel at Windsor.'"[72] Dispersed at auction in 1842, this astonishing collection, numbering several thousand items, has been retrospectively documented by librarians at Yale University. According to one later biographer, Austin Dobson, Walpole was "an indiscriminate rather than an eclectic collector."[73] A dagger belonging to Henry VIII, Cardinal Wolsey's hat, and an Aztec mirror "curious for having been used to deceive the mob by Dr. Dee, the conjurer, in the reign of queen Elizabeth" were other curios scattered amid the Old Masters (Rembrandt, Van Dyck, Poussin, Reynolds, Canaletto, Giorgione, Holbein, Rubens, Watteau, van der Weyden).[74]

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[71] Jennings, *Pandaemonium*, p. xiii. Emphasis added.
[72] Strawberry Hill website, http://www.strawberryhillhouse.org.uk/collections.php (accessed 3 March 2015).
[73] *Horace Walpole: A Memoir* (1893), quoted in Merton and Barber, p. 36.
[74] Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill Collection website, http://images.library.yale.edu/strawberryhill/index.html (accessed 3 March 2015).

The Victorians found such "an inveterate trifler" (as Gibbon described him) little to their taste, detecting an equivalence between Walpole's untidiness of mind and his want of moral character. Hazlitt fumed:

> His mind as well as his house was piled up with Dresden china and illuminated through painted glass; and we look upon his heart to have been little better than a case full of enamels, painted eggs, ambers, lapis-lazuli, cameos, vases, and rock-crystals. This may in some degree account for his odd and quaint manner of thinking, and his utter poverty of feeling: He could not get a plain thought out of that cabinet of curiosities, his mind ... He was at all times a slave of elegant trifles, and could no more screw himself up into a decided and solid personage, than he could divest himself of petty jealousies and miniature animosities. In one word, everything about him was little, and the smaller the object and the less its importance, the higher did his estimation and praise of it ascend. He piled trifles to a colossal height—and made a pyramid of nothing 'most marvellous to see.'

Macaulay agreed that for Walpole "Serious business was a trifle, and trifles were his serious business ...The third province, the Odd, was his peculiar domain." "He coins new words, distorts the sense of old words, and twists sentences into forms which make grammarians stare," he complains, an evident sign of "an unhealthy and disorganized mind." One such new coinage, as we have seen, was "serendipity." And yet, Macaulay goes on, "Walpole perpetually startles us with the ease with which *he yokes together ideas between which there would seem at first sight to be no connection*."[75] He seems to have been ahead of his time.

[75] All quotations from Merton and Barber, *Serendipity*, pp. 24-31.